AN ALLIED FRONT

A conversation with …

Geoff Dixon, CEO, Qantas Airways
Share and CodeShare Alike

Codeshare agreements and alliance memberships can multiply the complexity of an airline's schedule distribution process. But the use of advanced technology, such as the Sabre® AirFlite® Planning and Scheduling Suite, can optimize the process.

By Kevin Stupfel I Ascend Contributor

The codeshare revolution has pushed the schedule distribution departments at many airlines to the brink. Not only has the volume of data increased exponentially, but also the increased complexity of codeshare relationships requires greater analysis to extract the maximum value from each partnership. Airlines have struggled to find automated solutions that simplify the problem, but they usually resort to additional resources to manage the demands of publishing an accurate and timely schedule.

Today’s airline landscape has forced the distribution strategies of just 10 years ago to change drastically. Historically, codeshare agreements were commuter franchise arrangements using a shared designator. Without duplicate legs to worry about, distribution was as straightforward as tracking the commuter schedule to the end of the mainline timetable. The birth of duplicate legs added complexity to the distribution, requiring carriers to update their codeshare schedules in a coordinated manner with their partners’ updates.

The current challenge facing many airlines is far more than just a clerical distribution problem. The codeshare agreement of yesterday, when airlines extended their networks beyond a gateway, no longer meets the needs of airline planners. Today, partners operate in the same home geographic region, causing network analysis to be pushed to a new level of sophistication. With the complexity and rapid development of codeshares, manual processing is no longer an adequate solution.

While the surge of codeshare flights in overlapping networks is a relatively new concept, the technology that has supported the major alliances for years is already capable of supporting the complex analytical and distribution needs created by these agreements. A suite of tools can help automate the schedule distribution process, ensuring that airlines realize the maximum benefits from their codeshare relationships. The Sabre® AirFlite® Schedule Manager can easily read any partner’s SSIM and display the information for the analyst to examine. Like Schedule Manager, systems should be able to retain all of the commercial information, such as passenger reservations booking designators and in-flight service indicators, to be used later in the distribution process.

The tricky part of processing a partner’s schedule is mapping the codeshare flight numbers onto the new schedule. In a traditional codeshare arrangement, where airlines share services beyond a gateway, a tool such as the Sabre® AirFlite® Codeshare Manager can automate the overwhelming task of assigning flight numbers. The tool will carefully analyze both the passenger connection rules and the underlying agreement to ensure that the correct passenger origin and destination combinations are continuously served.

Partnerships where the networks overlap or where nearly every flight in the network is shared with a partner require a more powerful tool to forecast the overall network profitability. This analysis is performed prior to flight number assignment to choose the optimal set of flights to apply to the codeshare route. A forecasting tool, such as the Sabre® AirFlite® Profit Manager, is needed to predict the share of traffic flowing from the codeshare network onto the mainline services and can quantify the profitability benefit of each codeshare service. Since time is limited between the moment the partner schedule is received and the codeshare schedule must be distributed, these tools will improve the codeshare selection process.

In the distribution solution engineered for the Star Alliance, it was important for one partner to be responsible for selecting PRBDs to be derived from both a partner’s network onto the mainline services and can quantify the profitability benefit of each codeshare service. Since time is limited between the moment the partner schedule is received and the codeshare schedule must be distributed, these tools will improve the codeshare selection process. The Star Alliance, it was important for one partner to be responsible for selecting codeshare flights. The major alliances use different strategies for assigning responsibility, much as they all have one carrier empowered to make the decisions and keep the distribution process flowing smoothly. In many cases, the operating carrier or marketing carrier is responsible for its individual flights rather than empowering one partner for all shared flying.

Once the task of flight selection and flight number assignment is complete, the distribution task shifts to the efficient data preparation of the codeshare schedule for external distribution. The timing is critical to coordinate the external release of schedule data at the same time as the partner carrier. The schedule system must read and store the appropriate data from the partner’s SSIM to reattach the information for external distribution about the codeshare relationship. If an alliance partner offers dinner and a movie, then its codeshare partners must also share this information on their codeshare service for the passengers.

Not all commercial data can be derived from a partner’s SSIM. A tool must apply the proper traffic restrictions to meet the marketing goal of the codeshare as well as remain compliant with all governmental regulations. Additionally, the PRBDs are important to a distribution strategy. In some cases, a carrier’s codeshare flights must be derived from both a partner’s cabin offering and its PRBDs so bookings can be made to the appropriate partner in the host global distribution system. The Schedule Manager can preserve all of the aspects of the partner’s schedule and apply the required data in an automated process. It can even derive the appropriate PRBDs using the partner’s offering. This automated process can extend the time available for analysis on the schedule knowing the clerical work will be easy and accurate.

With the appropriate automated systems in place, the codeshare analyst can evolve from a clerical position coordinating data entry to a strategic position empowered to maximize the profitability of the codeshare relationship. As technology continues to evolve, the industry must embrace alliances with the vision and commitment to maximize profitability of the combined network. The effective communication and distribution of codeshare data is the first step in this industry evolution.

Kevin Stupfel is a product manager for the planning and scheduling group at Sabre Airline Solutions. He can be contacted at kevin.stupfel@sabre.com.
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